

Library Awards Keynote Address
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He ate and drank the precious Words—
His Spirit grew robust—
He knew no more that he was poor,
Nor that his frame was Dust—

He danced along the dingy Days
And this Bequest of Wings
Was but a Book—What Liberty
A loosened spirit brings—

* Emily Dickinson, #1587

I came to love books rather late in life, having spent most of my childhood playing in the forests near my home. Capturing crawdads and salamanders in the cool, clean creeks proved to be much more enticing than a sedentary afternoon spent inside reading. This might seem a strange admission coming from a professor who's NOW committed her life to sharing her passion for the written word with her students and who writes and researches almost daily. Nevertheless, it is the truth and I have confessed. So what were my reasons for choosing the great outdoors over books during this early part of my life? I believed mere words on a page could never compare with the vibrant diversity of life that teemed in the woodlands. What could a book teach me that Nature couldn't, I rationalized. Looking back now, I realize and acknowledge my extreme ignorance and limited vision. At the time, however, no one could convince me otherwise. Simply put, I was a tomboy. And I wanted to do tomboy things. Unlike Dickinson's metaphorical wings gifted by books, I found mine outside in Nature. I ate and drank the beauty of creation. And this type of nourishment was important for PART of my development.

It wasn't until the second semester of my freshman year in college that I understood something else was needed for me to fully develop and I began to sense the liberty Dickinson identifies as a consequence of reading. At that point in my life my spirit was not "loosened" by poetry, but rather by philosophy, specifically existentialism. Now, many would argue that this school of thought could never loosen anyone's spirit, only weight it heavily with existential angst, dress it in black turtlenecks and berets, and quench it with richly roasted espresso. Nevertheless, an entirely new world opened up to me and authors such as Nietzsche and Sartre invited me to contemplate ideas that I had never even known to think about before. I had come to understand that research was an invitation to explore, much in the way I explored the mountains as a child. Researching was a way to both breed and feed my curiosity. Just as I discovered multi-colored mushrooms on the forest floors, I discovered multi-colored book spines in the Emory library. Hours upon hours would pass as I buried myself in the stacks, hunting and retrieving books for whatever research topic had been assigned. I reveled in the discovery of another philosophical idea or a vital statistic to help prove my argument. Such dedication to discovery did prove beneficial in many ways, not the least of which was my GPA. I specifically recall a religion professor's comment at the conclusion of one of my extraordinarily long research papers. After the A, he had penciled in "Well-Researched."

It's important to note here that in the mid-80s, I didn't have access to a computer and instead relied solely on books and hardcopies of journals. InfoTrac had not been invented. You Tube was not even an inkling in anyone's mind. I actually wrote all my papers by long hand on legal pads, which I have stored in my attic, and then transcribed

the words on a typewriter, praying that I wouldn't mess up and have to begin a page anew. But I digress, just as I digressed from my chosen research topics frequently. During my solitary forays to the library, more often than not I became distracted by other works on the shelves boasting enticing titles on subjects I'd not yet encountered. I reasoned, how could I pass these by? How could I neglect the opportunity to acquire more knowledge that could lead, potentially, to deeper wisdom? After all, this is what the philosophers taught me, this insatiable desire to know and probe and question. Although I didn't realize it at the time, I had embarked on a quest in my undergraduate years that would lead me to become a life-long learner. Socrates was right, you know. An unexamined life is not worth living.

So I continue to examine life, at both the micro and macro levels, locally and internationally. I hope that I serve as a role model for my students in this way for I believe that higher education's main purpose is to prepare students to become globally conscious citizens who will contribute to their society in meaningful, positive ways. And research provides the tools to do this, to understand life in all its complexities and to effect the type of change I see as necessary to rectify the many injustices of our world. Yet we must know how to research, where to research, and how to critically evaluate the information we find in our research. For only then can we use it to create compelling, logical, yet impassioned, arguments. There IS power in the written word.

And I encourage all students, no matter what age, to tap into that power, to harness it and utilize it for good. Pursue your own curiosities and passions, probe various resources to find answers to your questions, and then share your discoveries with the

world. For as Dickinson extols in her poetry, through this process we ALL acquire wings to fly.